

Better Writing with Big Paper: Peer Correction in Collaborative Learning Teams

by AIDA KOÇI McLEOD

Writing is an important part of literacy development and an essential skill for life outside the classroom. As a result, many English classes emphasize improving students' writing abilities. This applies especially to courses that seek to prepare international students for admission to tertiary study programs in Anglophone countries. How can our students ever improve the quality and accuracy of their writing unless we, their teachers, correct their language mistakes?

There has been a decades-long disagreement, among the experts on the teaching of writing, about how to correct, how much to correct, and even whether to correct at all! If the teacher corrects every mistake (it's called "recasting"), the student remains passive, learns little or nothing, and becomes discouraged. If the teacher corrects nothing, the student cannot tell right from wrong English, learns little or nothing, and continues making the same mistakes. Where does the right balance lie?

Most teachers are too busy to churn through the research publications on written corrective feedback (WCF). They are looking for practical advice. In this article, I describe a practical method by which I have increased the quality of my students' written English while decreasing the quantity of WCF that I would have to do in order to achieve this improved quality. The method is called "Big Paper Team Writing." In its basic form, it uses good old-fashioned pencil and paper and assumes we are back in our physical classrooms, face-to-face with our students. With some adaptation, it can also be used

effectively in an online or hybrid learning situation, as explained in the Appendix.

Why hands-on is good, big is beautiful, and silence is golden

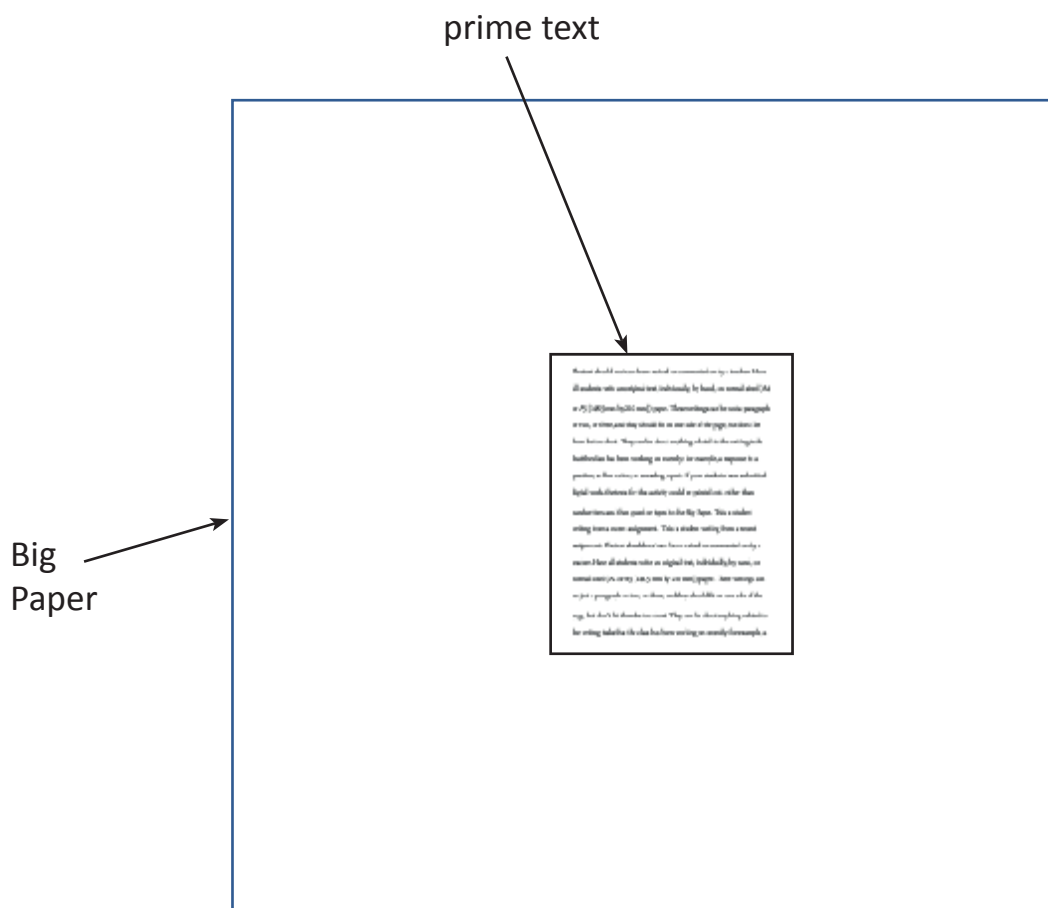
In a nutshell, Big Paper is a peer-collaboration strategy in which a group of students gather around a large-format page, which is blank except for a stimulus text pasted in the centre, to which they respond—silently—by writing comments. The idea is to elicit and pool everyone's reactions on a single readable surface, enabling all to see the whole picture at a glance. The method allows for visible cross-referencing and interlinking of comments.

The Big Paper approach is familiar from history and social studies courses, where its use is well documented—for instance, in work published by the social advocacy group Facing History and Ourselves (facinghistory.org). However, use of the approach has been limited to one specific function: eliciting student responses to the ideas in a stimulus text. In other words, focusing on content. This article shows how to adapt the Big Paper to serve a new purpose: focusing on form, correcting and improving the spelling, grammar, and use of punctuation in learners' English writing.

Advantages of the approach

I have identified quite a few advantages of the Big Paper approach:

1. It is a hands-on practical activity that gets students up off their chairs and into physically learning by doing.



The prime text, which is uncorrected student writing, is taped or glued to the center of the Big Paper. Students will (silently) write comments about the text on the Big Paper; they will then write comments about one another's comments, also on the Big Paper.

2. It is social and collaborative, getting everyone to work together simultaneously on a task that combines action with reflection.
3. It results in a concrete physical product, a large-sized poster, that can be displayed on the classroom walls to make a gallery for students to walk around, look at, review, talk about, and feel proud of. Students' self-esteem, both individual and collective, is improved when they know that people are going to see their group's poster and appreciate their efforts.
4. The work is done in complete silence, so it cuts out the distractions and looseness of oral discussion and obliges students to set down their thoughts in written English, which is different and more rigorous grammatically than spoken English.
5. The students are in charge of about 90 percent of the process, which maximises their feeling of being active, empowered, and autonomous—all of which is positive for the level of learner engagement, the essential prerequisite for deep learning.
6. It harnesses the power of peer feedback, which has a strong influence on learner engagement and motivation.
7. It yields durable output that provides the teacher with data on how the students are thinking about their language use and that of their peers. This yields actionable

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pedagogical insights into their learning needs.

8. It places each learner in the role of proofreader and editor of the written work of their peers, which attunes them to notice the specific accuracies or inaccuracies of their own writing and to acquire the habit of applying critical thinking to what they read and write.
9. Because students write more slowly than they speak, Big Paper slows down their thinking, giving them time to reflect and plan what they will write and encouraging them to consider the views of others.

The procedure

The following instructions assume a class of about 20 learners. A typical Big Paper exercise is spread across two lessons, if your lessons are 45 to 60 minutes in length. It is assumed that your class is above Beginner level and has been working on some definite set of grammar or lexical standards prior to the Big Paper session, which then has the function of testing and exercising learners' control of those grammar and spelling points, and strongly consolidating them. With 20 learners, you can form five groups of four students. If your class is smaller, you can scale back the number of groups: a class of 15 would have three groups of five, a class of ten would have two groups of five, and so on. A class of 30 or above can still do a Big Paper activity, with larger groups: in that case, the members of each group would line up to take their turn at the Big Paper, since the Big Paper could not feasibly be accessed by ten people at once. The only other adaptation needed for such a large class size would be to make more time available so that every student would have the opportunity to contribute comments.

Step 1: Preparing. Before the lesson, obtain sheets of A1 size paper (594 mm by 841 mm), typically used for flipcharts. A3 size paper (297 mm by 420 mm) will do—the exact size is not important, but anything substantially smaller than A3 won't work. If ready-made large-sized paper is unavailable, you can task students to tape together (say) six A4 sheets (210 mm by 297 mm), using adhesive or sticky tape, to make one blank sheet of Big Paper. (Turn this large sheet over for use so that the tape is on the back surface and will not block any of the students' writing.)

Obtain a set of different-coloured markers to hand out to all students. These can be coloured pencils, pens, or felt-tipped markers, which should not be too broad-tipped because it is hard to write legibly at any length with the broader kind. In many countries, four-colour ballpoint pens are obtainable easily and cheaply, and they work well because they enable the students to write smaller and fit more comments on the Big Paper. The comments will not be readable at a distance, as felt-marker writing would be, but that is not too important; in this exercise, close-up viewing is good. Ordinary graphite pencils are usable, but at the cost of losing some differentiation of authorship of the comments. A rigid scheme of colour-coding is not really necessary; you can also ask students to draw an outline of some sort around their comments when they have finished writing them. That is, one student draws a square, another draws a circle, another underlines, another uses a squiggly line, and so on. Students can come up with their own ways to personalize their comments, if necessary.

Step 2: Grouping. *This takes no more than five minutes.* Start by organising your learners into groups of four, at random. Five to a group will also work, but anything larger becomes

cumbersome and counterproductive. Each group should be given a number or choose a fun name. If you have markers in five different colours, it can be useful to give the groups a colour name (Red Team, Blue Team, etc.) and get all members of the Red Team to write in red, the Blue Team in blue, and so on.

Step 3: Creating the “prime text.” This step may vary in duration, so it makes sense to use learners’ writing from a previous lesson or from a homework task. The text should *not* have been revised or commented on by a teacher. Have all students write an original text, individually, by hand, on normal-sized (A4 or A5 [148.5 mm by 210 mm]) paper. These writings can be just a paragraph or two, or three, and they should fit on one side of the page, but don’t let them be too short. They can be about anything related to the writing tasks that the class has been working on recently: for example, a response to a question, a film review, or a reading report. If your students have submitted digital work, the texts for this activity could be printed out, rather than handwritten, and then glued or taped to the Big Paper. You can select the ones that you think will support the most discussion; or you can make a random selection of (say) five of them, if you have five groups of four learners—one prime text for each group—or a different number depending on your class size.

Step 4: Setting up the space. *This should take about five minutes.* Nominate one student from each group to glue or tape their “little paper” (that group’s prime text) to the middle of their Big Paper. There are three ways to go from here, depending on the furniture and arrangements in your classroom, and I have used all three with positive results. You can spread the Big Papers on the desks, one desk for each group, if your desks are of a suitable size; you can tape the Big Papers on the walls; or you can let the students sit around their piece of Big Paper on the floor.

Step 5: Getting down to work. This is the main phase, and it must proceed in silence. This is essential because the students

must concentrate on what to write, and any talking will inevitably distract them from that purpose. Spoken comments are lost in the air, whereas written comments remain visible and take their place in the chain of comments. There will probably be some talkative students in your class, but you must gently and firmly insist that they stay silent. All group members must silently read their given prime text. Then they silently respond to the text—in writing, in the big wide margins around the prime text that is in the middle. Each student is to comment on the *language features* of the text. Group members will then silently respond *in writing* to the comments and corrections written by the others in the group. *Allow 30 minutes for this stage.* Just to be clear about what is happening here in practice: the same group is responding to the text *and then responding to those responses written by others in the group.*

The responses should suggest improvements or corrections to the original, as well as to the comments made by other students. It is also possible for comments to take the form of questions, which the next commenter can attempt to answer. Students can draw lines on the page to connect their comments to those of others. Essentially, they are to conduct a written conversation, in silence, about the correct or incorrect features in the original text and in each other’s comments. Comments can be positive and constructive, not just corrective. It is important for students to understand that they can comment on correct features—that they are not just looking for mistakes. At any given time, more than one student can be writing because the large paper size enables four or five people to reach in and write.

Step 6: Switching around. *This should take a further 20 minutes.* After about 30 minutes, the groups rotate:



Students write their comments silently. No talking!

Until you try this technique, you might think it is a recipe for unintelligible, scribbly chaos. It's not. The results will surprise you by how productive, engaging, creative, and revealing they are.

all groups move to the desk (or wall/floor position) of the next group. All students then read the next group's prime text plus all the comments on that group's Big Paper. Using their markers, they build on the conversation already there. Still no talking!

You are now close to the 60-minute mark, so it's time to end the lesson, or to take a lesson break if you have a double period. If class time is over, collect all the Big Papers, noting on each one its position in the room. Next day, or next lesson, you put them all back as they were, and the next step can get going.

Step 7: Debriefing. It is worth spending *30 or 40 minutes* on this step and going into a degree of detail with your explanations and supporting examples. You, the teacher, now walk around from one Big Paper station to the next, reading out some of the comments and making your own comments on the issues raised. This is best done orally: do not write on the Big Paper yourself, because that would diminish the students' ownership of their artefact and make the whole exercise look like just another piece of teacher WCF. Do not feel you have to comment on every comment! A representative sample is useful enough for your learners. If the student commenters have missed something, or made unnoticed errors themselves, now is the time to mention it.

Note that this seventh step is not the occasion for a teacher monologue; it should be interactive, with the teacher tossing questions to the students, and the students asking questions, too. A typical teacher question might go something like this: "Here we read, 'Over 50 years Hawaiian islander were mistreated in they own Country'—now, can anyone see ways to improve that sentence?"

For the debriefing stage, it is useful to have a pointer, to point exactly to the student sentence that you want to explain or comment on. In some places, a telescopic/extensible pointer or even a laser pointer may be available, but really any ruler or just a 30 cm straight stick will work just as well.

Step 8: Following up. Task the original writer of each prime text—the words on the little paper glued or taped to the middle of the Big Paper—to recast their work in a second version, in which they are free to adopt or ignore the suggestions made by their peers. They can do this for homework. Next lesson, tape their revised version on the Big Paper, to the right of the first version. Tape it only along the top edge, to make a flap that can be lifted to reveal the peer comments that would otherwise be covered up. Your learners can marvel at the changes! This can certainly lead to further interest and discussion, deepening the learning. Since you don't want to leave the rest of the class with nothing to do for homework while the "lucky chosen ones" are doing their revision, you could assign them all to revise their own original text, applying what they have learnt from the Big Paper peer-collaboration activity.

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APPENDIX

Taking Big Paper Online

If your students have digital devices and Internet access, there are online workgroup collaboration platforms that are commercially available and that enable you to carry out a virtual Big Paper learning activity. I have used *VoiceThread* (VT) and *Padlet* successfully, for example. These platforms are certainly powerful and sophisticated, and they do present distinct advantages over a purely marks-on-paper approach. For instance, they allow students to take their time, work at their own pace, and edit comments to improve their quality and accuracy. These systems offer free trial versions, with volume limitations but containing the full feature set, which let you evaluate their suitability for your requirements.

VT works somewhat like a shared collaborative slideshow, but it is not limited to a sequential linear display of successive items, as a PowerPoint document would be, because it also offers a simultaneous overview of all comments. VT allows audio and video commenting, which is fun, but for the purpose of improving writing skills it is advisable to restrict your students to adding their comments and questions in written form only. It is simple to set up this restriction in the settings for each VT thread that you create. One advantage of VT is that you can split your target text material into bite-sized chunks and spread these across a number of slides, each of which can then form the focus of its own subset of student inputs. In this way, the overall Big Paper is better articulated into connecting portions, which makes the chains or threads of comments easier to follow. Each student comment gets a thumbnail icon, automatically generated, at the left of the screen, bearing the commenter's initials. You can open any comment just by clicking on its icon, or you can play through all the comments in chronological order by clicking the "play" button at the bottom of the screen. All comments can be moderated by the teacher before being published. VT has threaded commenting, which is a useful feature. You can also "playback" the whole Big Paper sequentially and export all of it as a digital movie in .mov format.

Padlet works like a shared collaborative digital pinboard or bulletin board. To make a virtual Big Paper, upload your prime text to the middle of a new blank "padlet" by double-clicking on it and following the prompts in the dialogue box that pops up. If you have five groups, you will create five such Big Papers, one for each group. You will need to have created your groups and issued instructions to all members of your class beforehand, about how you want them to post comments and questions on their group's Big Paper, and then respond to the comments and questions that the other members of the group have posted. Each padlet comes with a unique link to identify it, and anyone who has the link can join that padlet, so it is simple to send each of your groups the link for their padlet. Students add their comments by double-clicking anywhere on the virtual Big Paper and following the prompts to create a title and a comment text or question. They can then connect their contribution to another item or to many other items on the virtual Big Paper. Connection lines appear automatically, and the student comments can be dragged around and repositioned anywhere on the padlet. Any user can double-click on any comment to expand its contents and see how it is linked to other comments or to the target text. All this can be done live in real time, in a synchronous virtual-classroom lesson, or asynchronously, in the students' out-of-class time. Before your very eyes, you will see these Big Papers fill up with students' comments and questions, all of it grouped, arranged, linked, and structured on the same screen space.